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ABSTRACT

This document, from the lesson plan series, "Teaching with Historic Places," provides a description of George Washington's life and the building of the U.S. Capitol. George Washington became the first U.S. President after leading the colonies through the revolutionary war. The U.S. Congress and the President decided to create a federal city on the Potomac River near Alexandria, Virginia. George Washington laid the cornerstone of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. on September 23, 1793. Drawings, floorplans, and maps illustrate the text. Fifteen student activities supplement the text for instructional purposes in the elementary and secondary school curriculum. (CK)

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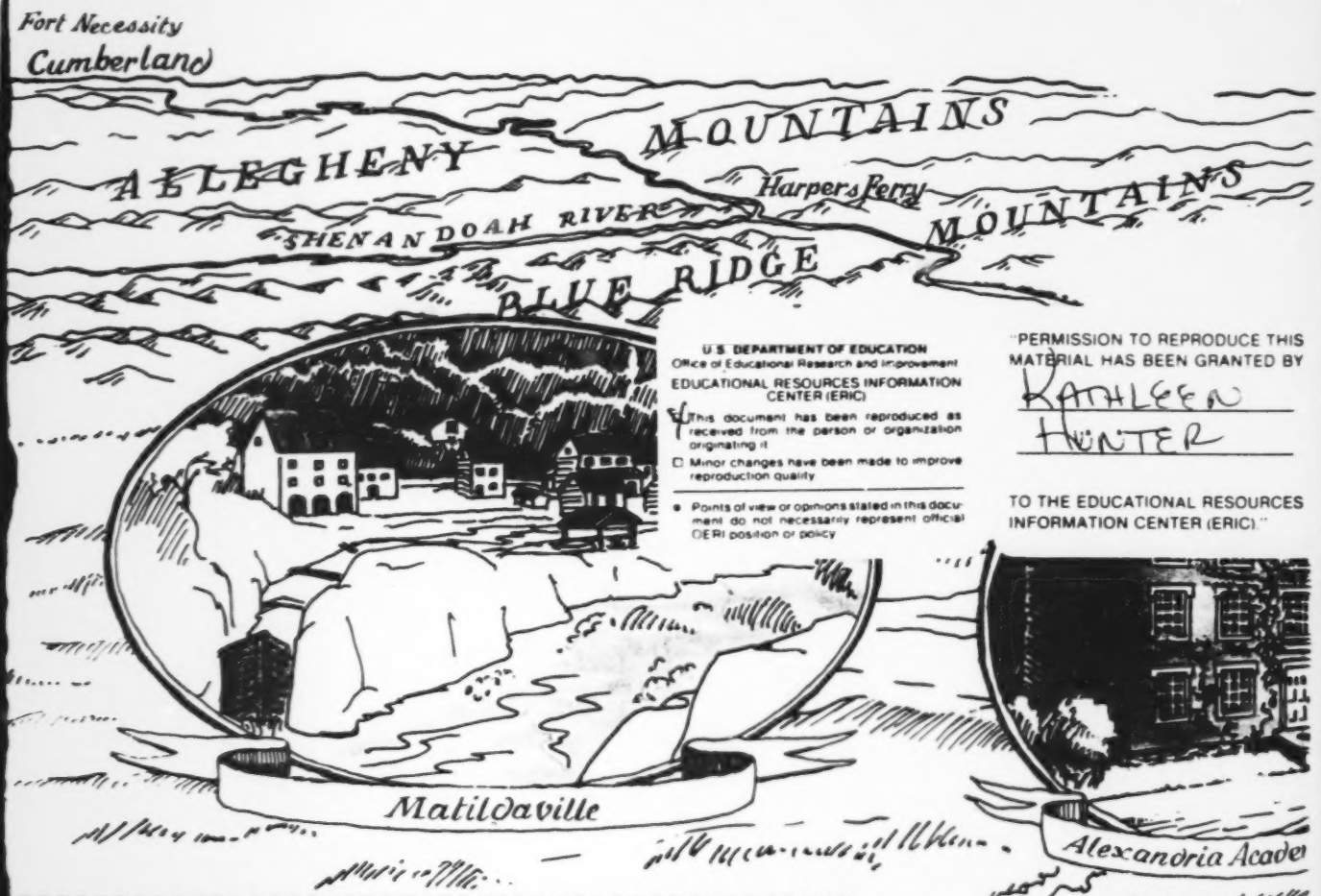

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GEORGE WASHINGTON

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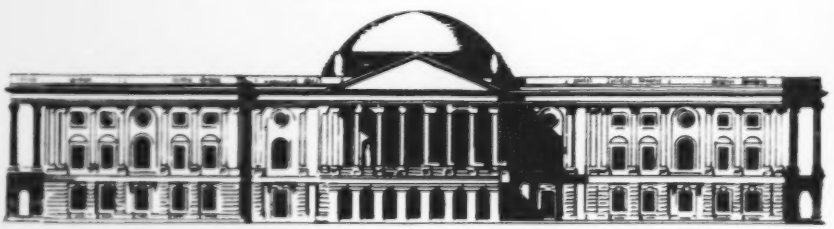

Temple of Democracy

A National Trust for Historic Preservation Field Study for the
Bicentennial of the United States Capitol
sponsored by the Georgetown Heritage Trust

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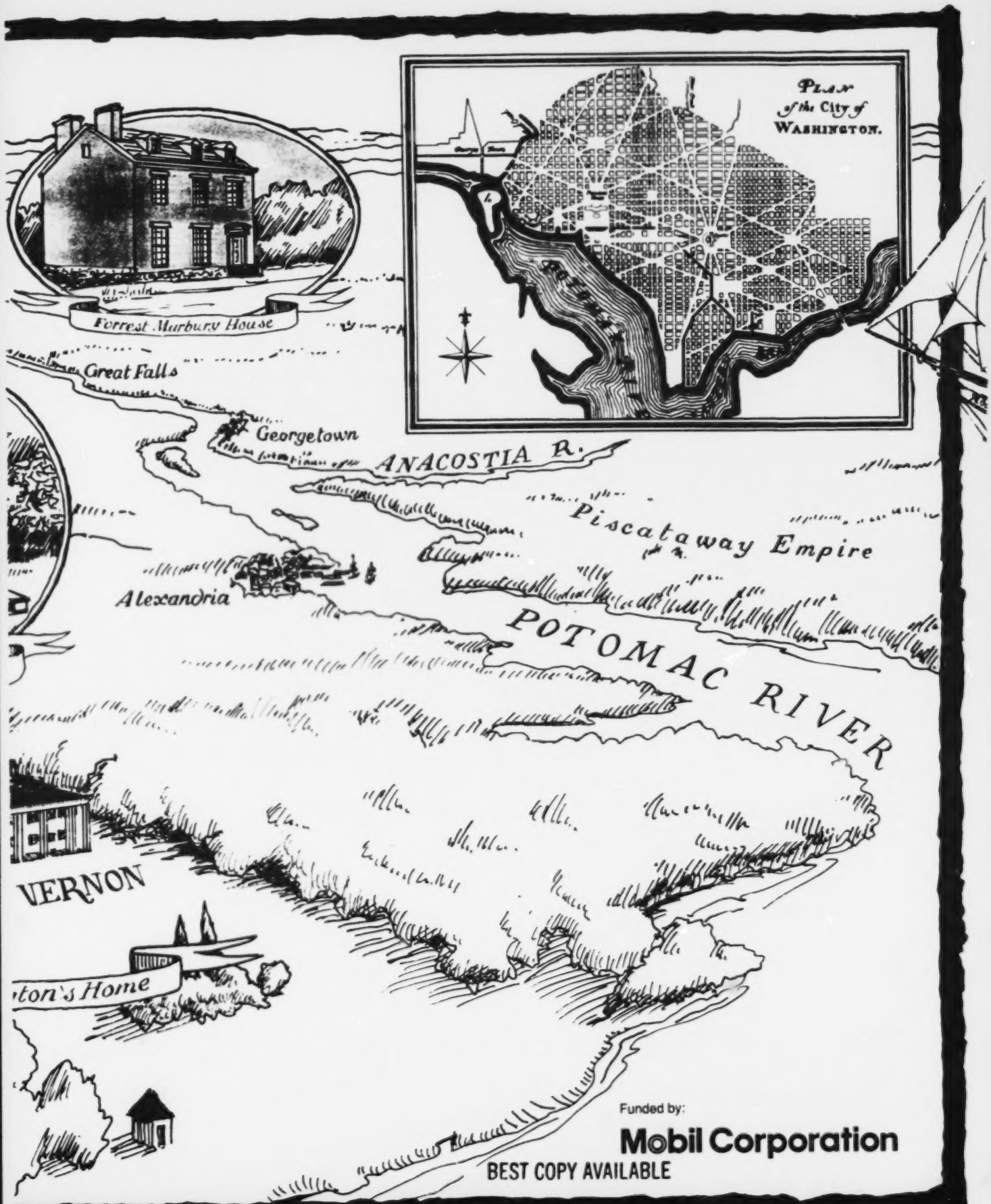

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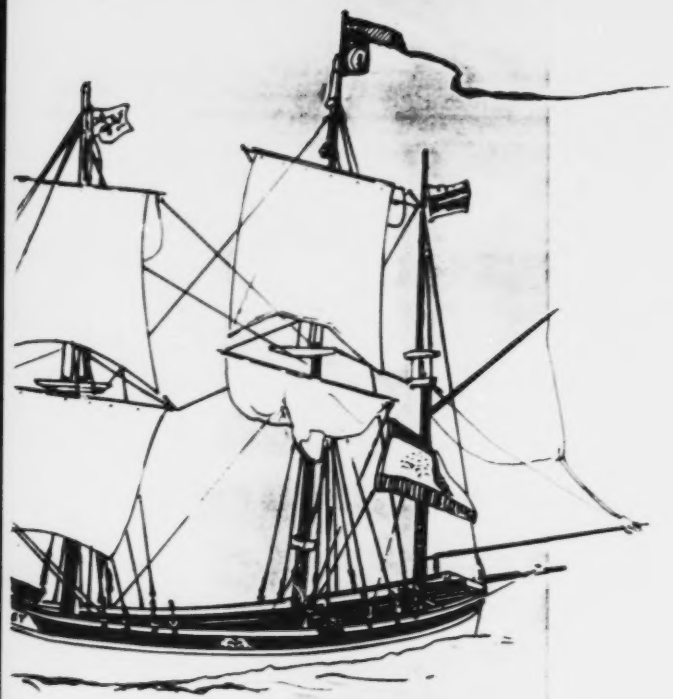


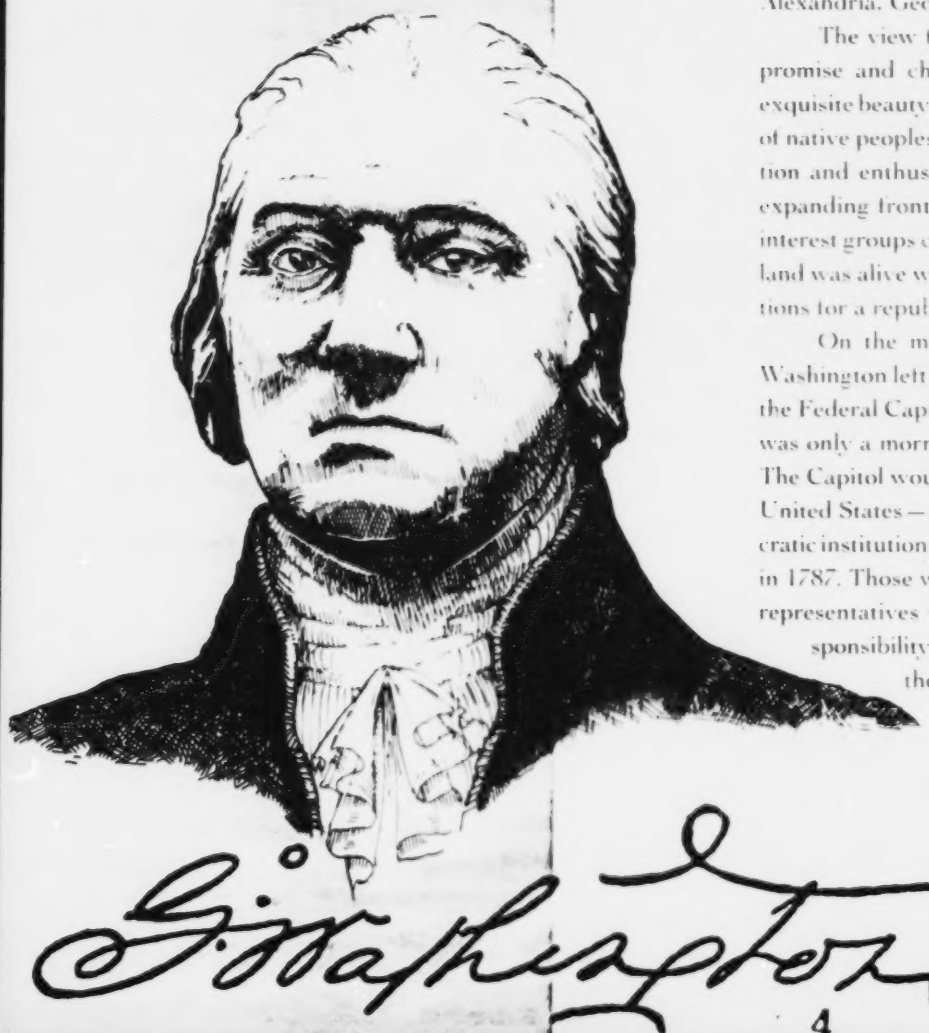
Teaching with Historic Places

George Washington and the Temple of Democracy

George Washington could look from the porch at Mount Vernon down his fields to the boat landings, across the Potomac River to the forests and farms along Maryland's shoreline where the once mighty Piscataway Empire had dispersed into isolated bands of Indians. To the north, the river reached into the interior, past Alexandria, Georgetown and the site of the new Federal City.

The view from his Virginia plantation was a portrait of the promise and challenge facing a very young nation. A land of exquisite beauty and humbling power, it hosted a brooding collision of native peoples, freeborn immigrants and the enslaved. Imagination and enthusiasm stimulated invention and enterprise on the expanding frontier. But suspicion and intrigue among states and interest groups complicated the growth of a national economy. The land was alive with lofty debate about the right values and institutions for a republican government.

On the morning of September 18, 1793, President Washington left Mount Vernon to lay the cornerstone for the Federal Capitol in a city that was just beginning. It was only a morning's ride by coach from his home. The Capitol would be home to the Congress of the United States—the nation's most precious democratic institution provided for by the Constitution in 1787. Those who came here as senators and representatives would have the awesome responsibility to write laws that would chart the nation's destiny.



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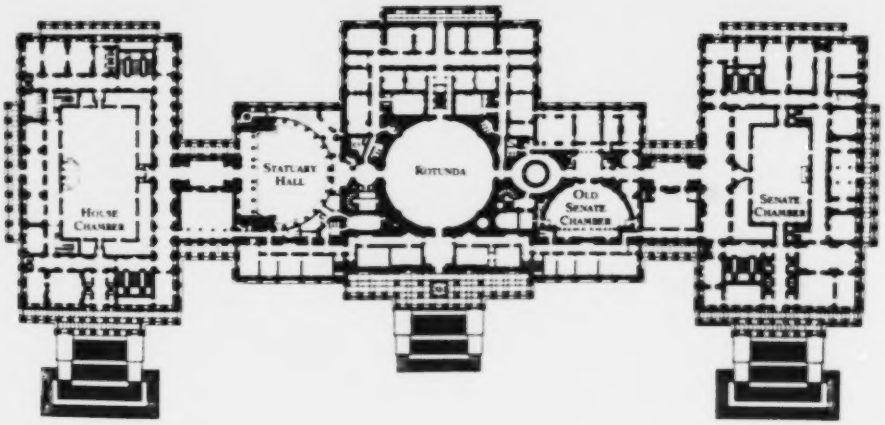
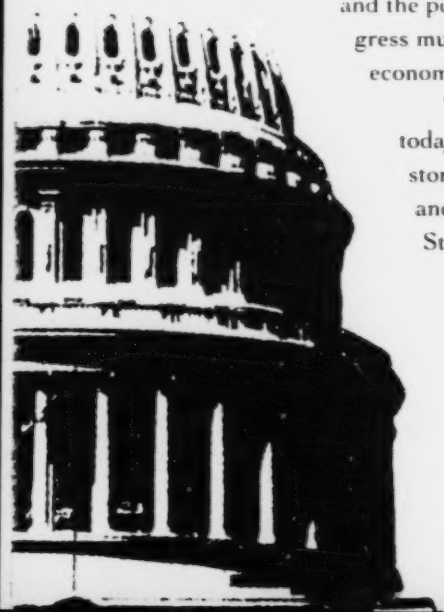


The U.S. Capitol. The Capitol's floorplan, above; drawing of the statue Freedom at right; and the dome as it appears today, below.

Washington was bonded to the land and its people. As a gangly sixteen year-old, he had travelled past the settled farms of the Chesapeake Tidewater and the Piedmont to survey the vast holdings of Lord Fairfax. He explored hardly-known landscapes beyond the Blue Ridge mountains and Shenandoah valley, following the Potomac's swift waters to their origin in the distant Allegheny mountains.

A few years later, a strong young man of twenty-two, over six feet tall, he returned to the region, leading the Virginia militia on a mission that sparked the European war for a wilderness empire (known in this country as the French and Indian War). On this expedition, his men hacked the first road into the Ohio River Valley that later became a part of the National Road. An inexperienced officer, he learned about humiliating defeat at Fort Necessity and about the economic and military chaos that plagued the colonial governments, tying Indians and colonists alike to the rivalries of far-off European powers.

Now, having led the colonies through a revolution to independence, he was the nation's first President. He and the people's elected representatives in the Congress must find orderly solutions to the social and economic ills they had inherited.



The weight of the cornerstone he would lay today was not measured by the stone alone. The stone was weighted with the trust, expectation and optimism that the citizens of the United States cautiously placed in their government.

Student Activities

George Washington and the Temple of Democracy

❶ *Why might Washington, Jefferson and other leaders of the republic believe an educated citizenry was critical to democratic government? Today we take free, or public, education for granted. How many public schools do you know of in your community? Who can attend these schools? How is public education paid for? Has the Congress passed laws to provide equal educational opportunities for all citizens?*

❷ *We also take freedom of religion for granted. How did the First Congress amend the Constitution to ensure freedom of religion? Discover and list churches, synagogues, mosques, temples or other places of worship in your community.*

Alexandria, Virginia

Since his youth, Washington had seen the city's wharves and warehouses loaded with trade goods from England, Europe, the West Indies, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The Potomac River was Alexandria's avenue to the world. The ladies and gentlemen of Alexandria dressed and dined as well as their counterparts in London. Planters and frontiersmen arrived from the interior with hogsheads of tobacco and wagon loads of timber, flour, alcohol and furs that they exchanged for manufactured items and trading goods for the Indians.

Washington played an active role in the Alexandria community. He belonged to the Masonic Lodge and concerned himself with the well-being of the citizens. On his way to the Federal City this day, he rode by the Alexandria Academy where he had created an endowment to provide a free education for indigent children in Virginia. He passed the site where St. Mary's Church was being built with donations from him and other citizens. This would be the first Catholic church in a colony where the Anglican church had been the established religion.

Washington travelled along the Virginia shore of the Potomac to Hite's ferry that took him across the river to Georgetown in Maryland and the Federal City.

❶ *How might Washington's experiences as a surveyor and military officer during the colonial period have led him to his vision of a nation from sea to sea? Why might Washington, and others in his day, have concluded that the great eastern rivers were the most likely roadways to the interior?*

❷ *Identify on the map the natural barriers that the Patowmack Company had to overcome in building their canal. Considering Washington's vision and these barriers, what other options might there have been for transportation to the interior?*

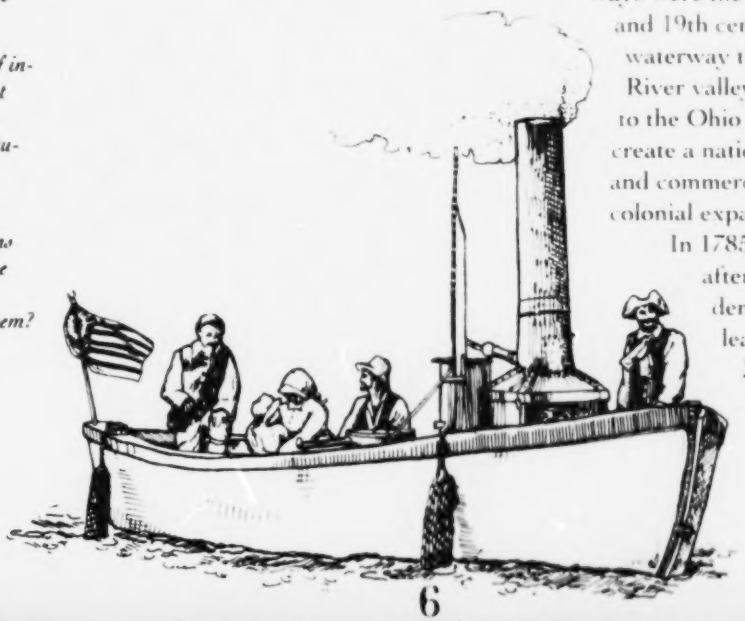
❸ *Using a road map, determine the extent of interstate transportation networks today? What modes of transportation have developed since Washington started his canal? What Constitutional provisions allow Congress to regulate interstate commerce?*

❹ *How have changing transportation systems and patterns affected your community over the years? Are there places that document these changes? What needs to be done to preserve them?*

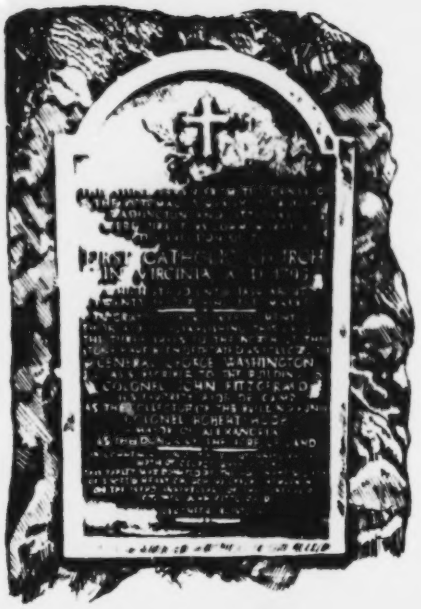
George Washington's Patowmack Canal

From the Chesapeake Bay to Georgetown, the broad Potomac River swells each day with the Atlantic's salty tides. Then the land rises sharply into the Piedmont and fresh mountain waters from the upper river thunder through the gorge of the Great Falls of the Potomac. For 10,000 years Indian tribes travelled the whole course of the river they named the "meeting place." Colonial boatmen poled shallow boats, known as bateaux, along the upper river, loaded precariously with trading goods. They then hauled their cargo overland past the Falls to meet the ocean going sailing ships at Alexandria and Georgetown.

Even before the Revolutionary War, the Potomac was intimately connected with Washington's vision of a nation reaching from sea to sea. Rivers and waterways were the highways of the 18th and 19th century. A navigable waterway through the Potomac River valley, linked by a short road to the Ohio River watershed, would create a national highway for settlers and commerce, and slow European colonial expansion.



In 1785, a private citizen again after the War of Independence, Washington joined leaders in Virginia and Maryland to form the Patowmack Company. Washington hired James Rumsey to find a way to bypass the river's treacherous rapids. Rumsey was an



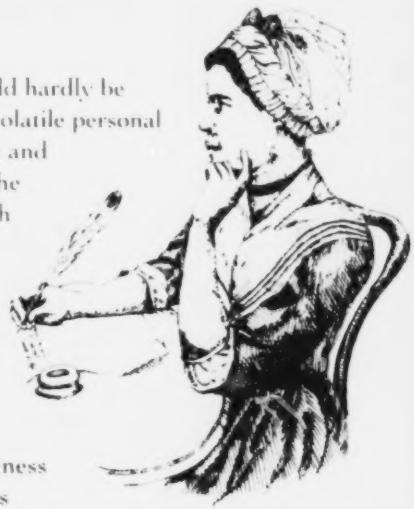
eccentric inventor from Shepherdstown on the upper Potomac. He attracted Washington's attention with a fascinating design for a steamboat that could replace the sluggish bateaux. Never having seen a canal lock system, Rumsey designed a remarkable series of locks to raise and lower boats around the Great Falls. The project spawned an economic surge along the upper river. Matildaville, Virginia, now a quiet archaeological site at Great Falls, was then a new community of craftsmen and housing for workers on the canal.

The difficulties of the former colonies in conducting interstate commerce frustrated projects such as Washington's canal. The lack of a common currency, interior trade barriers and land disputes precipitated gatherings at Mount Vernon and Annapolis that evolved into the Federal Convention at Philadelphia in 1787, at which Washington presided.

The continent beyond the mountains became ever more alluring. As the Convention met, the Continental Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, providing for the orderly settlement and governance of the west. One of the earliest acts of the First Congress under the new Constitution was to reaffirm the Ordinance.

When Washington died in 1799, the success of the canal was still in doubt. To further his hope for a National University, he bequeathed stock in the Patowmack Company given to him by Virginia "for the endowment of a UNIVERSITY to be established within the limits of the District of Columbia." The financially failed Patowmack Company was purchased by the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company in 1828, which completed a canal to Cumberland, Maryland. The canals, locks, earthworks and buildings are now protected by the National Park Service.

A Federal City on the Potomac



The exuberance of the new states could hardly be contained. Sharp political differences and volatile personal interests tugged and pulled at the President and Congress. But everyone was caught up in the spirit of Liberty, marking public events with orations and epic poems. The states built miniature sailing ships with patriotic insignia that they paraded through the streets as floats, or set sail in flotillas.

Grand purpose and optimism drove the design for the Federal City. Symbols and imagery of ancient civilizations were joined to those of abundance and expansiveness in the New World. *Columbia* symbolized this union. The name appears early in a poem by Phillis Wheatley, written for George Washington during the Revolutionary War. Taken from West Africa as a child and sold into slavery from the wharves of Boston, Wheatley wrote, "Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light, Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write." In 1792, exploring the western shore of the continent, Captain Robert Gray named the great west-east river Columbia—symbolically connecting it to the District of Columbia on the Potomac and a continental vision of nationhood.

Article 1, section 8, in the Constitution referred to "the Seat of the Government of the United States:" a site ten miles square and independent of the states. Choosing a site for the Federal City tested the First Congress's ability to balance the interests of the states with national purpose. President Washington's cabinet officers, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, negotiated a compromise among factions: the government would assume the war debts of the former colonies (the new states), and the Federal City would be built on the Potomac.

❶ *Describe how the Congress's requirements for the Federal City reflected its commitment to a central unifying government. How did the Federalists and Anti-Federalists differ in their positions towards a strong central government? What measures did the First Congress take to protect citizens against the excesses of government?*

❷ *Identify evidence of a plan for the development of your community. Research the planning office, library or historical society to find out how your city plan evolved. Ask elders in the community how the community's design has changed. Locate early maps and photos.*

❸ *Identify symbols of grandeur and heroism on public buildings, statues and monuments in your community. Why do we use these kinds of images on public buildings? What does it suggest about the public's attitude towards government?*

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Washington selected a site incorporating Georgetown and Alexandria. On July 16, 1790, Congress authorized Washington to appoint three Commissioners to acquire and survey the land, and "to provide suitable buildings for the accommodation of Congress, and of the president, and for the Public offices of the government of the United States." The deadline was the first Monday in December, 1800. Ten years to build a city!

On March 29, 1791, Washington and others dined at Uriah Forrest's home in Georgetown to finalize the acquisition of the land. Forrest, who had served in the Revolutionary War, was a major Georgetown landowner with a great interest in the development of the city.

Washington appointed Major Charles Pierre L'Enfant, a brilliant if temperamental French engineer who had served in the Revolutionary War, to design the Federal City. In just six months, L'Enfant presented Washington with his plan. The city has changed over the past 200 years, but L'Enfant's concept of a city that reflected a new social order remains honored.

L'Enfant located the executive and legislative branches of government in different areas of the city. He designated a square for the judiciary, although the importance of the Supreme Court was not fully understood at the time. Standing at the base of the hill that would someday be graced by the Capitol, he said that his plan was inspired by "...liberty hailing nature from its slumbers."

A Cornerstone for the Nation's Capitol

"On Wednesday, one of the grandest Masonic processions took place, for the purpose of laying the cornerstone of the Capitol of the United States...." the *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* reported on September 23, 1793. Washington crossed the Potomac to Georgetown and was met with bursts of artillery and by his Masonic brethren from Maryland and Alexandria. "The procession marched two abreast, in the greatest solemn dignity, with music playing, drums beating, colors flying, and spectators rejoicing, from the President's Square to the Capitol, in the city of Washington...."

Accompanied by his Commissioners, President Washington officiated at a Masonic ceremony to lay the cornerstone. Freemasonry traces its roots back to antiquity. It developed a philosophy towards society and government that Washington and some others at the time found compatible with their republican ideals of public service. It uses symbols drawn from many cultures and the building trades. Patriotic and Masonic symbols were interwoven on the apron Washington wore during the ceremony. His apron was made for him by Catholic nuns in Nantes, France.

A silver plate was laid on the ground, and the cornerstone lowered onto it. The inscription on the plate recognized George Washington's contributions to the nation: "whose virtues in the civil administration of his country have been as conspicuous and beneficial, as his military valor and prudence have been useful in establishing her liberties...."

❶ What might be the practical importance of a cornerstone? Why might it be symbolically important? Identify the cornerstones of important buildings in your community, such as libraries, schools, city halls and churches. What do the inscriptions on the stones say? Determine if a time capsule was placed in any of the cornerstones.

❷ Why do we hold ceremonies when we lay a cornerstone? Interview someone who has participated in a cornerstone ceremony, or find a newspaper article about a ceremony.

❸ Determine if there are organizations in your community that encourage public service, and if young people could be involved.

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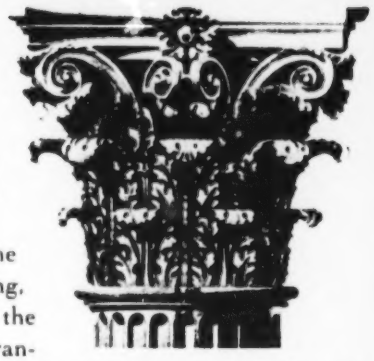
❶ *Why would Washington, Jefferson and L'Enfant want the Capitol building to be the most prominent building in the Federal City? Why would they refer to the Capitol as a temple?*

❷ *How did the Constitutional provisions for a representative government affect the growth of the Capitol? How does the Constitution and Federal law now limit the growth of the Congress?*

❸ *Prepare a chronology of events mentioned throughout the lesson on George Washington and the Temple of Democracy. What kind of decisions and activities characterized this period of nation-building? Is nation-building taking place today in other countries of the world? Do these countries face similar decisions?*

❹ *Identify where your Representative's and Senators' offices are located in Washington and in your state. Write and ask them about Federal laws or programs they are considering at this time. Determine what affect these could have on your community.*

A Capitol for All Time



The day Washington came to lay the cornerstone the Federal City was emerging from marshy streams and wooded hillsides. Wide avenues that someday would give expansive views of the Capitol were now rough roads through a city of grazing cattle and farms.

Dr. William Thornton, a physician from the British West Indies with no architectural training, submitted a plan for the Capitol. A late entry in the competition, Thornton's design reflected the "grandeur, simplicity and convenience" Washington sought. It incorporated the lines of classical architecture with a domed center and separate wings for the Senate and House of Representatives. The north and south sides of Capitol Hill are referred to still as the "Senate side," and "House side."

Against all odds, the North Wing of the Capitol was completed by the 1800 deadline. It was shared by the Senate, House of Representatives, Supreme Court and Library of Congress. Like Cincinnatus, the citizen soldier of Rome, George Washington had returned to private life to enjoy "...in the midst of my fellow Citizens, the benign influence of good Laws under a free Government...."

War, financial and technological problems, conflicting personalities and changing needs brought about many alterations to Thornton's design. The Capitol documents the contributions of extraordinary American building and landscape architects, engineers, artists and craftsmen, and the laborers who built the building. President Thomas Jefferson described architect Benjamin Latrobe's work on the building as "worthy of the first temple dedicated to the sovereignty of the people...." The Capitol was badly burned during the War of 1812. Latrobe started the restoration and the building was completed by Charles Bulfinch in 1826.

Over the years, the Capitol expanded to accommodate more people and activity. During the Civil War, when it served as an army barracks, hospital and bakery, work continued to extend the building and replace Bulfinch's dome with the cast iron dome we see today. Thomas Crawford's Statue of Freedom was raised above the dome. Expansions and repairs have continued through the twentieth century.

Rising 287 feet, the Capitol is surrounded by a 58.8 acre park designed by Frederick Law Olmstead. Its beauty and scale dominates the Federal City. The lustrous white exterior is a dramatic contrast to the richly ornate interior, partly decorated by Constantino Brumidi, an artist who came to this country in the mid-nineteenth century as a political refugee from Italy.

The United States Capitol is a visual record of 200 years of history. The cornerstone Washington laid for the Capitol remains the foundation for the nation and our heritage.

Teaching with Historic Places

Teaching with Historic Places is a program of the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It offers educational materials that use historic places to teach topics in the elementary and secondary school curriculum. It also offers professional development for teachers, interpreters and preservationists. For more information, contact Kathleen Hunter, NTHP, 1785 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. 202/673/4040.

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